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ABSTRACT

This document reports findings of two studies on relations between: (1) adolescents' peer relationships and their self-esteem; and (2) adolescents' social status and friendships. Participating in the first study were nearly 300 seventh- and eighth-graders who completed Harter's (1985) Self-Perception Profile for Children. This measure includes subscales for students' perceptions of their self-worth, social acceptance, and other aspects of their appearance and accomplishments. Subjects also reported on features of their friendships with up to three close friends. Over 300 children from the fifth, eighth, and eleventh grades participated in the second study. These students completed the tasks performed by subjects in the first study and also rated their liking for same-sex, same-grade classmates. On the basis of the peer ratings, students were judged as higher in either popularity or rejection. Findings indicated that friendship and social status are distinct facets of peer relationship. Peers' influence on classmates' sense of self is especially salient in the junior high years. Supplementary data showed that students' academic achievement, achievement motivation, and classroom behavior were only weakly related to their perceived social acceptance, social status, and friendships. (RH)

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Relations of Friendships and Peer Acceptance

to Adolescents' Self-Evaluations

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Paper presented in the 1990 AERA symposium, "Sources of social
support and feelings of well-being in childhood and adolescence,"
organized by Jeffrey G. Parker, Boston, MA.

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Relations of Friendships and Peer Acceptance to Adolescents' Self-Evaluations

A central question in this symposium is how peer relationships affect the sense of well-being of children and adolescents. For this talk, I would like to narrow the question a bit, by emphasizing the outcomes of peer relationships in adolescence rather than earlier in life. Near the end of the talk, I will make a few comments about elementary-school children. I will present evidence that suggests peer relationships may be less significant in the elementary-school years than in early adolescence, and more significant in early adolescence than near the end of senior high school.

I will narrow the question in another way, by focusing on a single index of adolescents' well-being. I will use a measure of adolescents' global self-esteem devised by Susan Harter (1985). She called this measure one of general self-worth. It includes items like the following: "Some kids like the kind of person they are, but other kids often wish they were someone else." Children who say they are similar to the first group of kids, who like the kind of person they are, receive higher scores for general self-worth.

Harter (1983) assumed that adolescents' perceptions of their self-worth are influenced by their satisfaction with several important areas of their lives. For example, the sense of self-worth is influenced by adolescents' perceptions of their scholastic competence, their physical appearance, and their social acceptance. Harter's measure includes subscales for each of these areas. For our purposes, the subscale for perceived social acceptance is especially important. This subscale

focuses on acceptance by peers, or success in peer relationships.

There are different facets of success in peer relationships, however. Many researchers have focused on an adolescents' social status in the large group of peers with whom they spend most of their time. Social status is often defined by popularity, on the positive end, and rejection, on the negative end.

Other researchers have focused on a different level of analysis of peer relationships (see Berndt, 1989). They have emphasized the importance of adolescents' closest peer relationships, those with their best friends. Several theorists have suggested that friendships provide support for adolescents that does not come from being popular in the peer group as a whole. A few researchers have argued, further, that popular children and adolescents do not always have supportive friendships. That is, social status and support from friends are not strongly correlated.

Thus there are two issues that are currently unresolved. The first issue concerns the connections between adolescents' peer relationships and their self-esteem. The second issue concerns the relations between two facets of peer relationships, social status and friendship. I will present data relevant to these issues from two studies.

The first study included nearly 300 seventh and eighth graders from three middle schools. The students completed Harter's (1985) Self-Perception Profile for Children. As I mentioned, this measure includes subscales for students' perceptions of their general self-worth, their social acceptance, and their evaluations of other aspects of their appearance and accomplishments.

The students also reported on the features of their friendships with up to three close friends. The students answered a standard set of questions about each of these friendships (see Table 1). They gave their answers on a 5-point scale for how often the kind of interaction described in the question occurred.

Insert Table 1 about here.

One set of questions involved the positive or supportive features of friendship. As the table shows, these questions deal with intimate self-disclosure, prosocial behavior, and emotional support or encouragement from friends. Another set of questions involved negative features of friendship, including both conflicts and domineering or rivalrous behavior. A third set of questions focused on the sheer frequency of interaction between friends. We derived composite measures of these three facets of friendship from the students' answers to the questions about all three of their close friendships.

Then we correlated the measures of friendship with the measures of perceived social acceptance and general self-worth. As you can see (Table 2), most of the correlations are significant but they differ in strength. Students who viewed their friendships as more positive or supportive had higher perceived social acceptance and higher general self-worth. The correlation with social acceptance was stronger than with self-worth, because general self-worth is influenced by other domains of adolescents' lives besides their peer relationships.

Insert Table 2 about here.

Students who viewed their friendships more negatively had lower perceptions of their self-worth but not of their social acceptance. These correlations imply that the relations of friendship features to general self-worth are not always mediated by perceived social acceptance. We know from other data that the students with more negative friendships were more disruptive in school and perceived their conduct as less desirable. Students with lower perceptions of their conduct had lower self-worth. This was another route by which friendship features affected adolescents' sense of self-worth.

Finally, students who interacted more frequently with friends had higher perceived social acceptance and slightly higher perceptions of their self-worth. The best interpretation of these findings is clearer when they are placed in the context of our second study.

The second study included over 300 children from the 5th, 8th, and 11th grades in a small school district. The students answered the same questions about their self-perceptions and about their friendships as in the first study. They also rated their liking for the other same-sex classmates in their grade who were participating in the study. Students who received higher ratings of liking were judged as higher in popularity. Students who received many ratings of 1, which meant "don't like," were judged as higher in rejection.

The correlations among the key measures are shown in the next table (Table 3). Five sets of these correlations are worth noting. I'd like to focus first on the relations of friendship to social status.

Notice that students who had more positive or supportive friendships and more frequent interactions with friends were higher in popularity and lower in rejection. The correlations are weak, however, especially for the measures of positive features and social status. These correlations confirm previous research (e.g., McGuire & Weisz, 1982) which showed that friendship and social status are separate facets of peer relationships that are largely independent.

Insert Table 3 about here.

Second, notice that the correlations for frequency of interaction are somewhat stronger than those for positive features. The difference implies that interaction frequency is more a measure of the quantity than the quality of adolescents' friendships. Thus it is correlated with an adolescent's status or social standing in the entire peer group of a class or grade in school.

Third, Harter's scale for perceived social acceptance was more strongly correlated with social status and frequency of interaction with friends than with positive and negative friendship features. (In a study with 3rd--5th graders, Ladd and Price [1986] reported comparable correlations between social status and Harter's social acceptance scale.) These correlations are not surprising when you look at the items on Harter's scale. Sample items include "Some kids have a lot of friends but other kids don't have very many friends," and "Some kids wish that more people their age liked them but other kids feel that most people their age do like them." Thus Harter's scale assesses the dimension of quantity in peer relationships more than the quality or

supportiveness of adolescents' closest relationships.

Fourth, the significant correlations found in Study 1 between friendship features and general self-worth were not replicated in this study. Even social status is only weakly correlated with general self-worth. I cannot fully explain why these correlations are so low, lower than in some past studies. A partial explanation may be hidden in the correlation between perceived social acceptance and general self-worth. The correlation of .44 shown in the Table held for the entire sample of 5th through 11th graders. The correlation varied significantly with grade, from .58 at 5th grade to .43 at 8th grade to .22 at 11th grade. The decrease in these correlations suggests that perceived social acceptance becomes less important to perceptions of self-worth with increasing age.

This conclusion is qualified by one final analysis. We used multiple regression equations to predict students' general self-worth from their perceived social acceptance and the other subscales on Harter's measure. We did the regression analyses separately for each grade. The beta weights for the various subscales--the predictors of general self-worth--are shown in Table 4.

Insert Table 4 about here.

Note that the strongest predictor of general self-worth is perceived physical appearance. Those of you who are parents or teachers of adolescents are probably not surprised by this finding. The next strongest predictor varies with grade. At 8th grade, it is perceived social acceptance. Moreover, perceived social acceptance is a

significant predictor of general self-worth only at 8th grade. The beta weight at 5th grade is only marginally significant ($p < .07$); the beta weight at 11th grade does not approach significance ($p > .10$).

Conclusions

What can we conclude? First, friendship and social status are distinct facets of peer relationships. Some adolescents who are highly popular also believe they have highly supportive friendships, but some do not. Conversely, some adolescents who are rejected by many of their peers believe that they lack supportive friendships, but some view their friendships as highly supportive. Thus to gain a full understanding of the potential effects of peer relationships on adolescents' sense of well-being, we need to examine both facets of their relationships.

Second, symbolic-interaction theories suggest that adolescents' sense of self depends on how they are perceived by significant others. This hypothesis is often expressed by the metaphor of the looking-glass self. Yet these theories do not identify who these significant others are. In terms of the metaphor, they do not say who is holding the looking glass in which adolescents see themselves. Of course, many people hold many "glasses" that adolescents look into occasionally. Yet our findings suggest that the glass held by peers is especially salient in early adolescence, or the junior high years. We need additional research to replicate these findings. If they are replicated, we will need research that tests explanations for the special significance of peer relationships during this developmental period.

Finally, I have not talked about the academic adjustment of the students in these studies. We collected additional data which showed that students' academic achievement, achievement motivation, and

classroom behavior were only weakly related to their perceived social acceptance, social status, and friendships. If we take the enhancement of students' self-esteem or sense of well-being as one aim of our schools, we will need to pay as much attention to their social lives as to their academic skills. We especially need to do so during the early adolescent years, the years of junior high or middle school.

Table 1. Examples of Questions Used to Measure Students' Perceptions of their Friendships

Questions on Positive Features

- 1. When something is bothering you, how often do you talk to this friend about it?**
- 2. If you asked this friend to do a favor for you, how often would he or she agree to do it?**
- 3. When you do a good job on something, how often does this friend praise or congratulate you?**

Questions on Negative Features

- 1. How often does this friend annoy or bug you?**
- 2. How often does this friend try to boss you around?**

Questions on Interaction Frequency

- 1. How often do you and this friend get together on weekends or after school?**
- 2. How often do you and this friend go over to each other's houses?**

Table 2. Correlations of Friendship Perceptions with Self-Perceptions

	Self-perceptions	
	Social acceptance	General self-worth
Friendship features		
Positive	.33***	.16**
Negative	-.11	-.26***
Interaction frequency	.37***	.13*

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 3. Correlations of Social Status, Friendship Perceptions, and Self-perceptions

	Social Status		Self-perceptions	
	Popularity	Rejection	Social	General
Friendship features				
Positive	.16**	-.16**	.14*	.03
Negative	-.03	.05	-.08	-.10
Interaction frequency	.27***	-.22***	.27***	.00
Social status				
Popularity		-.67***	.42***	.14*
Rejection			-.32***	-.09
Self-perceptions				
Social acceptance				.44***

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 4. Standardized Regression Coefficients for the Predictors of General Self-worth

	Grade			
	5th	8th	11th	All
Self-perceptions				
Social acceptance	.15	.19**	.06	.15***
Scholastic competence	.30***	.18*	.18*	.22***
Physical appearance	.40***	.52***	.45***	.47***
Athletic competence	.18	.08	.14	.13**
Conduct	.10	.13	.19*	.14***

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.